

Joe Shea

Friday, January 27, 2006

UNITED STATES SHIP
DUXBURY BAY
AVP - 38

At the outbreak of hostilities in what was to become WWII the United States Navy suffered severe losses at Pearl Harbor. As this country geared up for all out war thousands of ships and boats of all types were ordered into production. The Navy had long known that the war in the Pacific Theater would involve a great deal of island hopping and a real shortage of airfields. There would be a critical need for long range patrol aircraft. Through the pioneering efforts of Pan American World Airlines and others in the 1930's we had a reasonable understanding of the availability of suitable atolls, bays, rivers and sheltered island inlets. PAN-AM operated Flying Boats (seaplanes) and seadromes throughout the Pacific Ocean. After Pearl Harbor the airlines were no longer able to operate in the Far East. There was a real need to get eyes on the Japanese movements and water based long range patrol planes would prove to be the fastest and most suitable. Submarines performed this same scouting function but the seaplanes were faster and more flexible.

SEAPLANES

The principal large seaplane at the opening of hostilities was the PBY. This Consolidated Vultee Patrol Bomber aircraft was very dependable, easy to maintain and available. It was a twin engined seaplane with high wings and retractable wheels that would allow it to land on a runway if necessary. It was slow as aircraft went. The PBY was an excellent search plane due in part to the large bubble windows on the side of the fuselage. It performed most of its functions at 90 knots. It would climb, descend, cruise, takeoff and land at 90 knots it was all a matter of attitude and power. We knew it as the 90 knot wonder. It was the aircraft I intended to fly when I entered the Navy long after WWII was over.

What the PBY and the newer PBM could and did do in an emergency was land in the open ocean to effect a rescue of downed pilots and survivors of sunken ships. Many lives were saved by sometimes daring rescues of

downed airmen that were close to enemy held areas. The high seas made for difficult times so that type of landing was usually to be avoided. Generally open ocean landings were dangerous. Jato or jet assisted takeoff equipment was first used in the Iwo Jima Campaign to get a heavily loaded seaplane into the air quickly. It also got a plane out of the water in the open ocean faster. Jato was made up of disposable rockets attached to the side of the plane to give the plane enough of a boost to get off the water fast. Landing in a sheltered lagoon or bay was easier and safer. It was to provide these aircraft with services that Seaplane Tenders were developed

THE BIG BROTHERS

In order to understand what the Duxbury Bay was it might be helpful to look at what it was not. The Seaplane Tender of the day in the opening of the war was a large ship. There were only a few in commission at the outbreak of hostilities. The principal difference was size. These were big ships, some were 540 feet long and displaced up to 12,000 tons. They had complements of over 1,000 men. These ships could lift two seaplanes onto the fantail and work on both at the same time while tending to other aircraft in the water. They had full aviation machine shops on board and could do total engine overhauls on board. They were known as AVs. In the jargon of the Navy that meant A for auxiliary and the V was for fixed wing aircraft. There were about 13 of these AVs during the war. What was also needed was a smaller ship that could tend to the needs of a seaplane squadron other than heavy maintenance. Thus was defined the need for a smaller more agile seaplane tender. There were 13 AVPs before the war and another 46 were ordered into production during the War. The P stood for patrol. One might think of them as AV lite.

Tenders of both sizes would rendezvous with the aircraft in various protected bodies of water to refit, refuel and re-arm the PBYs or PBMs and other assorted smaller scout seaplanes. The tenders also provided berthing and administrative support for a squadron of 8 to 12 planes. The USS DUXBURY BAY, AVP-38 was of the smaller class of seaplane tenders. The naming pattern in use at the time called for seaplane tenders to be named after protected bodies of water. When the time came to determine names for the new class of smaller ships the Navy consulted some hydrographic charts and among others picked out the name Duxbury Bay.

ships

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Other east coast names used were Casco, Chincoteague, Rehoboth, Rockaway, Greenwich Bay and Biscayne.

The USS DUXBURY BAY was a Barnegat Class AVP of which 46 were ordered during the war. Usually the name of the first ship of each class of ship was assigned as the "Class" of ship. Thirty three were finished before production was stopped at the end of the war. 15 were turned over to the United States Coast Guard for use as Cutters as the war wound down and the need for them in the Pacific theater diminished. Some of these saw long service up to and including service in the Viet Nam war.

The Duxbury Bay was 310 feet 9 inches long and 41 feet 2 inches wide. It drew 13 feet 6 inches of water and displaced 1,766 tons. Top speed was 18 knots. She had a complement of 215 men. She was built in the Lake Washington Shipyard, Houghton Washington and launched on 2 October 1944. Lake Washington was a fresh water lake that gave access to the ocean via a series of locks into Pudget Sound

Duxbury Bay was sponsored by Mrs. R.E. Torkelson and commissioned on 31 December 1944. The Navy put a skeleton crew aboard the ship for security purposes before it was commissioned. One sailor from Cape Cod was part of that small group of men. They were issued one .45 caliber pistol which they were to share. They stood guard 24/7 over a black painted metal box on the bridge. Their instructions were to shoot anyone who touched that box. It was only after the full ships crew came aboard that they found out they were guarding a new advanced and very secret radar set. When the ship left the shipyard she was painted in a camouflage pattern she would retain for the war.

COMBAT OPERATIONS

The war was moving closer to Japan every day. Duxbury Bay moved down the California coast for its first operational training which it finished with flying colors. She then sailed from San Diego in March of 1945 to Pearl Harbor thence onward to Eniwetok and Ulithi atolls via Midway Island and Guam where she serviced planes. Then it was on to Kerama Retto off Okinawa where she participated in operations to subdue Okinawa. There they were involved in the largest seaplane operation ever conducted. As a part of the United States Third Fleet, most of which were moored in Kerama Retto there were an estimated 110 seaplanes based at the seadrome and

serviced by at least 11 seaplane tenders. In addition to providing moorings for the big planes she would float gasoline hoses on the surface of the water to refuel the planes. The small boats of the Duxbury Bay served as water taxis as they carried men and supplies between the ship and aircraft.

It was at Kerama Retto that the ship saw its first combat operations. Japanese Kamikaze attacks were a constant threat and too often successful. The Kamikaze attacks went on for weeks. Another threat was enemy swimmers from the many small islands looking to do damage to either planes or ships. Despite the ability of many of our ships to make obscuring smoke an estimated 68 ships in the area experienced damage from the airborne attacks. Some were towed to relative safety from the open seas to the anchorage. It was on May 6th that Duxbury Bay suffered its only combat loss of the war. Chief Quartermaster R.C. Nixon was killed at his battle station by shrapnel during a kamikaze attack. One crewman reported that at times the obscuring smoke was so thick that they never saw the attacking planes, but then the ships could not be easily seen either.

In July 1945 Duxbury Bay moved to what is now called Buckner Bay on the east side of Okinawa. There she established 102 moorings for the seaplanes that shifted to this new base. Here she served as the Fleet Post Office, mail tender and gasoline supplier to many of the small craft in the area. Mail from home would travel by seaplane to the Duxbury Bay and be distributed by her small boats to the other ships and forces in the area.

Among the missions of the seaplanes, in addition to long range search, was to position themselves along the route the Army Air Corps B-29s were using for their long range bombing attacks on Japan. Not all B-29s got home but the crews knew that the seaplanes would find them when they ditched in the open ocean. There were designated areas for those aircraft either crippled or out of fuel to ditch. Those bombing routes were hundreds of miles from land for most of the mission. These same planes rescued survivors of ships sunk by enemy action. A sister ship, the U.S.S. Bering Strait AVP-34, rescued 193 downed airmen and sailors between March and December of 1945.

While in Okinawa waters, a serious typhoon passed and subjected the fleet to a beating. Typhoon Louise had sustained winds of 100 knots and gusts to 120. The glass (barometer) hit 29.15. 12 ships were sunk and 222 grounded. 53 were damaged so bad they were stripped and abandoned.

Ships

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"Duxbury Bay" survived but one crewman I spoke to, Hank Collins, Radioman First Class, will never forget the ride.

POST-WAR

At the end of hostilities Duxbury Bay was sent to Jinsen, Korea for peacekeeping operations. Duxbury Bay served in the Far East tending patrol squadrons at Shanghai and Tsingtao, China, and Hong Kong, British Crown Colony, until returning to San Francisco in October 1946. At wars end she reverted to the more familiar navy gray paint job on the hull. During the war students in the Duxbury School system wrote to the sailors aboard ship. It was a real morale boost according to the late crewman Hank Collins who still remembered the letters 57 years later.

The period from wars end to 1950 saw the Duxbury Bay do two tours in the Far East including duty again at Okinawa and Yokosuka, Japan. Duxbury Bay was now servicing the largest seaplane in our inventory the new P5M Marlin. In early 1949 she left the Pacific operating area through the Indian Ocean around the tip of the African continent thence to her new home at Norfolk, Virginia. This trip was an "around the world cruise". The fall of 1949 found her conducting cold weather seaplane operations in the first ever flight operation in the harbor at Halifax, Nova Scotia supported by a seaplane tender. That exercise marked the end of her career supporting aircraft operations.

It was the advent of the atomic bomb, which led to the Navy ultimately phasing out all seaplane operations. In response to the Strategic Air Commands threat to rule the air and make the Navy obsolete the Navy brass launched a program to compete. This is where my path intersects with the Navy seaplanes. In 1957 I was selected?? To train to fly the hot new all jet seaplane to be known as the P6M SeaMaster. It was to be a nuclear capable seaplane that could hide from ICBM missiles in many places on the world's oceans. It was to be serviced by submarines modified to haul jet fuel. Remember, this was at the peak of the Cold War, even before the Berlin Wall went up. About one dozen of the P6M s were built but the program fell victim to being too far ahead of its time and the Navy put all their energy into other weapons systems. The decision was made in 1958 to slow development of the P6M and in 1960 to wind down current operations of all of the seaplanes in the U.S. Navy. I never got to fly one.

Diplomacy

The next fifteen years saw Duxbury Bay in the role of Command Ship and as a protocol platform from which the United States could practice diplomacy and to "show the flag" all over the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. Three ships, The USS Duxbury Bay AVP-38, USS Greenwich Bay AVP-41 and USS Valcour AVP-55 were refitted for diplomatic duty and painted white in the process. In the course of the refit the Aviation Gasoline tanks were converted to engine fuel tanks thus giving the ship extraordinary range and ability to operate alone. The former Aviation Stores spaces provided voluminous storage for foodstuffs and other supplies. Other than Hospital Ships they were the only ships in the post war Navy painted white. The lack of air conditioning was significant when the ambient temperatures often exceeded 110 degrees. The three ships rotated duty in the Middle East. In many of the ports she visited Duxbury Bay was the first U.S. warship ever seen by the residents. The British were pulling out of the Persian Gulf area and the U.S. did not want Russia filling the gap. It was that Cold War thing again. The ship was known as the "Galloping Ghost of the Persian Coast" for the many trips and port visits up and down the Persian Gulf and the unusual white color. In deference to the prohibitions on alcohol in many of the Arabian countries beer for the crew was stored on board and only issued when the ship could locate an uninhabited island on which to grant the crew liberty. They were always able to find one.

King Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia, in 1953, called the U.S. Navy in the area the "Bedouins of the Sea".

Duxbury Bay transported dignitaries to conferences including His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and the Emperors matched pair of pet Cheetahs. In 1953 Emperor Selassie gave the crew nearly a ton of Ethiopian coffee beans which, when divided, gave each crewmember almost 4 pounds of exotic coffee beans.

Just before Christmas 1961 the Duxbury Bay entered the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers known as the Shat - al - Arab to steam up river to the port of Basra, Iraq. It was the first time American forces visited Basra, but not to be the last. During this visit, after diplomatic honors were exchanged, the crew competed with the locals in both soccer and basketball. The sailors narrowly lost both contests but enjoyed the competition.

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Jim Queeny of Beaverbrook Road remembers seeing pictures of the ship with Persian carpets covering the decks. One Sheik to be transported would not enter a small boat thus requiring several very difficult dockings in shallow bays in Saudi Arabia. In 1963 the same Sheik after noticing that the crew did not wear wristwatches presented every crewmember with one. It was his way to help out the U.S. In transporting some of the high level guests they would often bring sheep and goats with them in addition to a retinue of retainers.

When she came home to Norfolk, Virginia for refit there was often little rest. This was when new crewmen came aboard and new equipment was installed. Home leave and training schools kept all hands busy. In time it was necessary to go to sea and test the crew to insure they were up to current standards before deploying back to the Middle East. This testing was routinely conducted at "GTMO". Guantanamo Bay, Cuba was and is a large Naval Base in the Caribbean. Duxbury Bay was undergoing testing in October 1962.

MISSILE CRISIS

In news that shocked the world Russian Missiles were discovered on the island of Cuba only 90 miles from the U.S. mainland. In October 1962 Duxbury Bay evacuated 341 dependents from the Naval Base at Guantanamo, Cuba to Norfolk, on an emergency basis during the missile crisis. That evacuation was so sudden that the dependents had no winter clothing to wear in the chill fall season of Norfolk. The evacuees were told to leave the house keys on the dining room table and wait outside for a bus. An underway replenishment from an ocean going tugboat (ATF, Auxilliary Tug Fleet) was organized on short notice transferring on the high seas donated clothing from the people of the bases around Norfolk and forty gallons of fresh milk for the children before arrival at Hampton Roads. A total of four ships evacuated 2,800 non combatant men women and children in one day. The crisis eased and most of them were able to return home to GTMO before Christmas.

CHANGING WORLD

The world changed and bigger ships took up the mission of diplomacy in the Middle East and Persian Gulf. The Duxbury Bay, originally built to last the war had simply worn out and her missions were achieved by other

means. In the course of her 22 years of service she was received the following Awards, Citations and Campaign Ribbons: In order of precedence they are China Service (extended); Navy Expeditionary Service Medal (Cuba); American Campaign Medal; Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal; World War II Victory Medal; Navy Occupation Service Medal (with Asia Clasp) and the National Defense Service Medal.

During the 22 years Duxbury Bay served the nation she transited the Pacific Ocean at least three times and the Atlantic at least 10 times. Duxbury Bay also spent a lot of time in the Red Sea, The Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. The Mediterranean and the Sea of Japan was home for a while. She sailed around the world and around the African continent. Eventually the ship wore out and the decision was made to send Duxbury Bay to the ship breakers.

DECOMMISSIONING

The Town of Duxbury was notified of the pending decommissioning in the event they wished to participate. The late Mr. William (Bill) Nash and his wife, of Surplus Street, were on holiday in the area and were contacted to see if they might be able to attend on behalf of the Town. Bill had a long association with the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society having served as President from 1963-65. He arranged for the Navy to ship to the D.R.H.S. the ships wheel, bell, Builders Plaque, a life preserver, a brass nameplate and a group of framed photographs from the Duxbury Bay. The life preserver went missing for many years and turned up mounted on the wall in the Duxbury Room at the present library.

The D.R.H.S. stored and displayed these relics as the Navy called them for about 20 years. All relics have to be inventoried and accounted for to the Navy every year. All of these items are still owned by the U.S. Navy. In 1986 the late Fred Potter, then President of the D.R.H.S. returned all of the relics to the Navy except the Ships Bell, and the brass nameplate custody of which had been transferred to the Town of Duxbury in 1976. That transfer was approved by the Navy and the Town now has to account to the Navy for the bell each year. In the event the Navy ever commissions another ship with our name on it the Navy reserves the right to recall the bell to active service. The bell is prominently displayed in the central rotunda at Town Hall.

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On 29 April 1966 in a formal ceremony aboard the Naval Base, Norfolk, Virginia the U.S.S. Duxbury Bay, AVP-38 was decommissioned as a fighting vessel in the United States Navy. The Commissioning Pennant and the National Ensign are removed. The crew was dismissed and the vessel was then turned over to the Commander of the Norfolk Group, U.S. Atlantic Reserve Fleet for disposal.

Judy Johnson Foote of Congress Street remembers that all the students in the Duxbury schools observed a moment of silence in honor of the ship at the precise time the ceremony was being conducted.

In recognition of the decommissioning the Duxbury Board of Selectmen participated in "suitable services" at a ceremony on the "Long Bridge" That bridge is the ½ mile long wooden bridge that crosses Duxbury Bay. In a typical naval tradition a memorial wreath was dropped on the outgoing tide. A number of residents and several sailors from the crew of the Duxbury Bay attended. The sailors were later taken on the grand tour of town and made to feel welcome.

THE END

In July 1967 the former U.S.S. Duxbury Bay, AVP-38 was sold for \$48,900 to a scrap metal dealer.

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